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# From "free" labour to labour commons: Employing cooperativist values and institutions to re-conceptualise work

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**ABSTRACT (245 words):**

A dominant labour form in modern capitalist societies is "free" wage labour, freed from means of production and employers. However, this freedom is rather questionable, as labour is transformed into a commodity and ceases to provide the means for pursuing substantive human values of social and environmental protection. In this article we examine the possibility of "freeing" commodified labour forms by building labour commons. A labour commons is a space where labour is perceived as a shared resource and work relations are organised in ways that serve common needs and goals. Thus labour is not a commodity; it is seen as an inherently social activity, a human capability organised and reproduced on the basis of rules and systems of cooperation and social welfare. In the article, we ask whether labour is really free by exploring concepts and figures of "forced" and "indecent" work, especially in the context of the European Union. We speculate that European integration, and its underlying relations, institutions and policies, were influenced by the neoliberal project, which supported competition, capital accumulation and free movement in the Single Market, leading to the individualisation and marketisation of work and the worsening of living and working conditions in Europe. Therefore, we suggest a re-conceptualisation of work by creating labour commons via cooperativist values and institutions, which foster self-management and participatory democracy. This further requires a new European economic and social model founded on collective principles and practices of redistribution and reciprocity.

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## 1. Introduction

A dominant labour form in modern capitalist societies is "free" wage labour, freed from means of production and employers. However, this freedom is rather questionable, as labour is transformed into a commodity and ceases to provide the means for pursuing a good life and a better society. Human values of social and environmental protection have been largely underestimated and violated in our economies. Our working and living conditions across the globe reveal our inability to manage our own lives and to obtain the resources needed for a subsistent and substantive living, reflecting various kinds of deprivation that can constitute sources of "un-freedom". We find different forms of non-economic and economic exploitation of labour in both the developed and developing world: undocumented labour, trafficking, below-poverty earnings, appalling working conditions, unpaid overtime, long workdays, precariousness, the absence of social security and the weakening of workers' collective representation and political dissent. These conditions have been exacerbated by the Great Recession of 2008 and the debilitating effects of welfare state retrenchment and austerity programmes that have been put forth by national governments and international organisations to resolve the negative impact of the economic downturn.

In this article we examine the possibility of "freeing" commodified labour forms by building labour commons. A commons is a space where labour is perceived as a shared resource and where work relations are organised in ways that serve common needs and goals. Thus labour is not a commodity anymore; but it is rather seen as an inherently social activity, a human capability organised and reproduced on the basis of rules and systems of cooperation and social welfare. First, we ask whether labour is really "free" in our contemporary societies. In Section 2 we explore the concepts and figures of "forced" and "indecent" work to assess the quality of employment and the degree of exploitation of labour. We focus on developments in the European Union, and evidence the rise in unemployment and poverty, the decline in the quality of employment and the worsening of people's living conditions, which comprise sources of "un-freedom". By consulting various approaches we speculate that European integration, and its underlying relations, institutions and policies, were influenced by the neoliberal project, which supported the withering away of social welfare policies, capital accumulation and free movement in the Single Market, leading to the individualisation and marketisation of work.

In light of these developments, we suggest a re-conceptualisation of work by creating labour commons. In Section 3 we discuss alternative labour forms that would secure genuinely "free" labour, free to determine and pursue a good life and a better society. We study alternative concepts of work within a labour commons. Then we examine cooperatives as production units that have a dynamic presence in the history of social and political struggles in Europe and have the potential to build a labour commons. We argue that cooperativist values and institutions could help promote labour commons and alternative conceptions of work by fostering self-management and participatory democracy. We also examine how market-deepening and market-regulating forces generated by EU institutions and policies may impact cooperativist values and institutions across Europe and affect their prefigurative and transformational potential. We discover that a new European economic and social model is required, one that goes beyond the Single Market canons,

and that establishes collective principles and practices of redistribution and reciprocity. In the concluding section we explore some paths for future research.

## 2. Is labour really "free"? Concepts and figures

### *2.1. "Work sets you free"*

The motto *Arbeit macht frei*, translated in English as *Work sets you free*, appeared on the entrance of Nazi concentration camps during WWII. It reminds us that modern-day humankind was capable of criminally distorting the concepts and practices of freedom and work—the very universal values usually employed to distinguish us from all living beings on earth. In the camps the only kind of freedom prisoners could expect (or even wish for) seemed to be death, though Nazi military authorities would claim that endless labour would cultivate a sense of self-sacrifice, endurance and perseverance, and bring a kind of spiritual freedom to prisoners (Friedrich, 1994).

Although we may think that these atrocities are a thing of the past, we regretfully discover different forms of forced or coerced labour today. ILO (ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017: 10) defines forced labour "as all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily". Thus, this definition consists of three elements: it refers to work of all types in any activity, industry or sector, including the informal economy; it covers a wide range of penalties used to compel someone to work; and it focuses on involuntary work, that is, work not undertaken with the free and informed consent of the worker.[2] According to ILO data, in 2016, 24.9 million people were trapped in forced labour: 16 million were exploited in the private sector such as domestic work, construction or agriculture; 4.8 million were in forced sexual exploitation; and 4 million were in forced labour imposed by state authorities. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by forced labour, accounting for 99% of victims in the commercial sex industry, and 58% in other sectors (ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017). Apparently, this is not a phenomenon restricted to countries of the less developed world. In 2012, the Developed Economies and EU (including the EU-27[3], the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, and Japan) accounted for 1.5 million (7% of the global total) forced labourers, following the Asia-Pacific region (56%) and Africa (18%) (ILO, 2012). The figures are high, and perhaps even higher if we consider the difficulties involved in conducting the surveys and collecting such data worldwide. A major problem is that often these types of labour cannot be

[2] In particular, work would be exacted under menace of penalty if one or more of the following occurred: physical violence; sexual violence; threats of violence; threats against family; locked in work or living quarters; kept drunk/drugged; punished through deprivation of food, sleep, etc.; punished through fine/financial penalty; threats of legal action; withheld passport or other documents; had to repay debt; withheld wages; too far from home and nowhere to go. Furthermore, work would be considered involuntary if one is forced to work: by an employer; by a recruiter; to repay a debt with an employer or recruiter and not allowed to leave; in one kind of work, though offered something else, and not allowed to leave; as a slave for a master; to help another family member who was forced to work by an employer; or for an employer so that another person would receive a job, land, money, or other resources (ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017: 53-54).

[3] Minus Croatia, which joined a year later in 2013.

recorded, either because they are found in the informal economy; they are illegal; they prevent workers from disclosing information about their working and living conditions; or they are located in regions where conflict has undermined the rule of law and social protection (ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017: 18, 28, 78).

To explain the existence of contemporary slavery and forced labour, McGrath (2005) argues that unfree labour of this kind is not necessarily a vestige of a formerly dominant pre-capitalist mode of production. She presents cases in which forced labour could be considered as part of a process of primary accumulation during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or it could even be part of an established capitalist society, mainly for social and political reasons (e.g., discrimination against immigrants or women). She talks about gendered labour in social reproduction as an expression of unfree labour. Production for the market became a value-creating activity, whereas production at home was considered valueless from an economic point of view and even ceased to be considered work. Household production became a mystified, invisible and natural vocation reserved for women, despite its importance for the reproduction of labour power and the accumulation of capital. To extract surplus from free labour, capitalist relations needed to impose unfree labour and devalued labour in social reproduction within the household. McGrath also makes an interesting case for trafficked labour. By defining them as crime victims, she purports, we evade the question of why there is a demand for this kind of unfree labour in the first place. Similar to domestic work, prostitution reflects discrimination against women and their labour, which is devalued and perceived in non-market terms.

According to Lerche (2011) and LeBaron and Phillips (2018), the ILO definition is somewhat problematic. Firstly, it excludes economic forms of coercion (e.g., starvation), as well as certain forms of state-imposed forced labour (e.g., some forms of prison labour). Secondly, it implies a neat binary between "free" and "forced" labour, even though many forms of "free" labour involve considerable levels of exploitation, especially in low-waged sectors (e.g., undocumented work, especially among immigrants, violation of maximum overtime, absence of social security and safety standards at work). The ILO definition of unfree labour is based on the liberal understanding that, in general, labour and capital, as factors of production, meet as free agents in the market, qualifying labour relations as non-exploitative. Forced labour relations are considered exploitative, because they are seen as a deviation from this free labour relation whenever the employer uses non-economic force to undercut market labour prices or workers' rights. Thus, if labour is compelled solely by economic reasons, without extra-economic force, to accept below-poverty line pay and appalling conditions of work, then this is by definition non-exploitative, because the price of labour and the conditions of work are determined by the market and hence represent a "just" price for "free" labour. Ultimately, the economic aspects of the labour relation (exploitation/non-exploitation) are separated from its political aspects (unfreedom/freedom).

Lerche (2011) observes that Marx used the free/unfree dichotomy, but as a core line of division between capitalist and pre-capitalist exploitation. According to Marx (2004 [1867]), in the capitalist system labourers are free in the double sense: they are free from other means of production and they are free to dispose of their labour-power as their own commodity to any capitalist who wishes to buy it. However, Lerche continues, this does not mean that under capitalism

the exploitation of wage labour disappears. Marx (2009 [1932]) argues that the very processes of commodification and dispossession of labour-power do generate what he terms estrangement and alienation of labour, where workers lose ownership not only over their own labour-power, but over their own persons and lives.

Overall, the ILO definition falls short of examining different forms of exploitation, both economic and non-economic, which create additional sources of "un-freedom". The term "indecent" work is often used to capture economic sources of exploitation and un-freedom. International organisations such as ILO and the EU have recently adopted agendas for defining and assessing decent work by looking into the qualitative dimensions of employment.[4] However, it is important to bear in mind that to explain contemporary indecent work or unfree labour broadly defined we need to connect it to the ideological, economic and political processes of neoliberal globalisation (Lerche, 2011; LeBaron and Phillips, 2018). We turn to this issue below.

### *2.2. A social union (of social unions) sets you free*

European unification was initiated after the World War II in order to bring peace to the continent and support restructuring. The socio-political philosophies of the Enlightenment and their ideas of freedom remind us that every rational being has both an innate right to freedom and a duty to enter into a civil condition governed by a social contract that realises and preserves that freedom. Rauscher (2017) focuses on Kant's analysis of the history of international relations. Kant argued that, similar to individuals, states must be considered to be in a "state of nature" relative to one another, thus potentially at war with one another; they are therefore obligated to leave this state of nature to form some type of union under a social contract. He was confident in the historical progress of humanity toward the ideal condition of a union of states, where a federal government would exercise coercive power, but decisions would rise from discursive processes among member states. Rulers and citizens alike would soon come to realise that it is in their interest to establish a civil constitution and increase the freedoms of citizens, and then join to create a federation in order to ensure more peaceful relations and more productive states. The faith in a social union of social unions, as Kant would call it, is evident in the first declarations of European unification in the 1950s. Throughout the course of European integration in the past 70 years, the idea of freedom remains central. It was the Single European Act of 1987, which institutionalised the Internal Market programme and specified the goals of the "four freedoms": the free movement of *goods*, *services*, *capital,* and *people*. However, we argue that 30 years later, the Great Recession of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis of 2010 brought to the fore nothing but the institutional feebleness of the European Common Market in providing social protection and securing substantive human values, which profoundly undermined its core value of individual freedom.

Put simply, free movement does not necessarily translate into free access to the resources that satisfy our basic needs and preserve a substantive living. According to EUROSTAT's recent report on living conditions in Europe (EUROSTAT, 2018), in 2016 nearly 40% of the total disposable income in

[4] We present and discuss relevant data for the EU in Section 2.2.

the EU-28 could be attributed to people in the top quintile of the income distribution, while people in the bottom quintile of the income distribution received a 7.7% share of total disposable income. There were 16 EU Member States that reported a falling share of total disposable income attributed to the lowest income quintile over the period 2011-2016. The largest declines were recorded in Romania and Sweden, two countries with considerable differences in relation to the development of the economy and the welfare state. According to a recent OECD study (Balestra and Tonkin, 2018), wealth inequality is twice the level of income inequality on average. Using data of 2015 or latest, the study shows that across the OECD, the wealthiest 10% of households hold a bit over 50% of total net wealth, compared with 24% of income held by the top decile of the income distribution. OECD countries in which the richest 10% of households owns the largest proportion of wealth are located in Europe and include the Netherlands (68%), Denmark (64%) and Latvia (63%), following the US (79%). On the other hand, the share of wealth held by the bottom 60% of households is negative in both Denmark and the Netherlands. This means that households have liabilities exceeding the value of the assets they own, which increases their vulnerability to changes in income and employment.

Recovery after the crisis has not put a halt to the rising income and wealth inequalities, nor has it reduced poverty and social exclusion. EUROSTAT data shows that in 2016, an estimated 23.5% of the EU-28 population, equivalent to approximately 118 million people, was at risk of poverty or social exclusion,[5] way above the EU headline target for the year 2020 (20 million people). Figures for risk of poverty or social exclusion seemed to be greater among women (than men), young adults (rather than middle-aged persons or pensioners), and people with a low level of educational attainment (compared to those with tertiary level education). In fact, the in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate increased in the EU during the period 2011-2016, so nearly one in 10 persons aged 18 and over was at risk of poverty despite being in work. Generally, across OECD countries, over 1/3 of people with income above the poverty line are considered to be economically vulnerable, meaning they lack the financial resources needed to deal with sudden income loss due to unemployment, family breakdown or illness (Balestra and Tonkin, 2018). As Sen (1999) rightly argues, deprivation of resources needed to increase human capabilities and lead a decent life is a source of "un-freedom".

The employment situation in the EU has particularly been the subject of extensive discussions and policy interventions in the past decades. According to ILO,[6] in the year 2017 the total and the youth unemployment rates in the EU-28 were higher (7.6% and 16.7% respectively), compared to other regions, namely ASEAN, BRICS and G20 countries. The problem is particularly acute in Southern Europe, where these rates (14.4% and 35.5%, respectively) are only lower than those of South Africa, and higher than those of South America, Northern Africa and the Arab States, which have also recently experienced economic and political crises. Generally, youth unemployment is a serious problem in Europe and requires further analysis and attention. According to EUROSTAT,[7] after the

[5] This indicator is based on the number of persons who are (1) either at risk of poverty (persons with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income); and/or (2) face severe material deprivation (as gauged by their ability to purchase a set of predefined material items); and/or (3) live in a household with very low work intensity (where on average the adults, excluding students, work 20% or less of their total work potential during the past year).

[6] https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/

crises of 2008 and 2010 the youth unemployment rates more than doubled in some EU countries. It appears that higher education does not offer young adults much employment security, especially in the crisis-ridden countries of the South, where the unemployment rates for young adults with higher education were on average over 20% after 2009. For NEETs (young people neither employed nor in education and training) the picture is grimmer in all EU countries. Furthermore, gender gaps remain high among young people aged 25 to 29: young women are more likely than young men to be NEET-inactive; and when young women are employed, they are more likely than young men to hold part-time or temporary low-paid jobs, even when they have a high educational level.

The quality of employment is equally important in assessing the population's living standards by focusing on decent wages and work conditions for employed individuals. EUROSTAT evaluates the quality of employment in relation to a long list of items falling under different categories, including ethics and safety, working hours, social protection, social dialogue, and skill development.[8] However, there are still no commonly accepted indicators or concrete targets for achieving job quality in the European employment policy. We thus appeal to the European Trade Union Institute, which conducts studies based on a composite indicator, the so-called European Job Quality Index (JQI) (Piasna, 2017).[9] According to the Institute's report, there is huge variation across EU countries: the overall job quality was particularly low in Greece (scoring at a bit over 0.1), followed by Romania, Spain, Poland, and Hungary (scoring at approximately 0.3), while Denmark, Luxembourg, Finland, and Sweden were among the top performers (scoring between 0.7 and 0.9), especially in relation to monthly earnings and collective interest representation. Specifically speaking, the bottom of the wage distribution is filled by Central and Eastern European, as well as Mediterranean, countries, all of which had wage levels in 2015 below the EU-28 average. With regard to collective representation, post-transition economies of Eastern Europe and liberal market economies, like the UK, rank at the bottom, while Nordic countries achieve the highest scores. Notably, the report discovers informal forms of employee representation, which tend to partially supplement formal ones in countries where the latter are rather weak. These somewhat reduce the gap among countries, but they do not change the ranking of the countries substantially (Piasna, 2017).

Thus, our evidence shows that European integration has not improved employment and social conditions in the EU, despite repeated commitments in treaties and policies to promoting equality and prosperity within and among Member States (e.g., the Social Policy Protocol of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the Employment and Social Policy title of the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, the 2000 Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs, and the Europe 2020 Strategy for achieving reductions in unemployment, inequality and poverty across Member States). The European Commission (2014) argues that these discrepancies are a result of the structural peculiarities of the EU, which combines a single currency with fiscal decentralisation, making Member States susceptible to negative spill-over effects by individual budgetary decisions or unbalanced intergovernmental negotiations. To mitigate the situation, it suggests further coordination among Member States by instituting supranational mechanisms—such as Open Method Coordination, the European Semester and the

[8] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/labour-market/quality-of-employment/

[9] The JQI assesses jobs in six dimensions: (1) wages; (2) forms of employment and job security; (3) working time and work-life balance; (4) working conditions; (5) skills and career development; and (6) collective interest representation. The overall index takes a value between 0 and 1, and is calculated as the average across indicators used in all these dimensions.

participation of social partners—in order to monitor national fiscal and employment policies and to restore the democratic deficit of EU institutions.

We agree that coordination and democracy remain critical factors in re-defining concepts and practices of work and freedom. Yet we argue that neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist theories of European integration that dominate the scientific and political discourse offer an insufficient explanation of the dynamics and outcomes of integration by centring on economic spill-overs or state-centrism and by seeking for culprits and solutions in the institutional setup of European integration. The unification process and the ways it has altered institutions, relations and living standards in Europe need to be considered in their social and political dimensions. As we discuss in the following section, European integration reflects a market-deepening and polity-creating process. It cannot be viewed solely as a set of technocratic interventions, which are capable of reducing divergence and conflict among Member States simply by freeing the movement of resources.

### *2.3. The social and political dimensions of the EU and their implications for labour*

Hooghe and Marks (1997, 2009) put forth what they call a post-functionalist approach, whereby regional integration and multi-level governance reflect not only the need for cooperation and redistribution, but also political conflict and communal identities. They perceive European politics as the interplay among overarching political designs or "projects", each of which identifies with a set of institutional reforms and coalitions of political actors at the European, national and subnational levels. They single out two projects that have dominated the debates about the emerging European polity since the 1980s: the neoliberal project and the project for regulated capitalism. On the one hand, the neoliberal project combines economic internationalism with political nationalism by eliminating a wide variety of non-tariff barriers among Member States through European legislation. The aim is to increase competition not only for firms and workers within the market, but also among national governments, which are penalised if they fail to arrange their economies to suit mobile capital by introducing austerity programmes and weakening the influence of social and labour interests. In this manner, the neoliberal project has managed to block the development of a Euro-polity, capable of regulating economic activity at all national and supranational levels. On the other hand, the project for regulated capitalism proposes the regulation of markets in order to create a social democratic dimension to European governance. Yet, as the authors argue, it does not question the dominant role of markets in the allocation of investment. Therefore, policy interventions, public-private partnerships and social solidarity at the supranational, national and subnational levels are seen as a means to mitigate political dissent and social conflict to ensure the unfettered functioning of markets. At the same time, the coalition for regulated capital is said to remain highly heterogeneous and diverse within and among Member States, preventing it from building a collective representation and bargaining system at the European level.

Bieler (2005) endorses neo-Gramscian approaches to describe the eventual outcome of the struggle among the different models of capitalism that prevailed in Europe. Generally, we could say

that neo-Gramscians investigate the ways in which concepts like hegemony and counter-hegemony, which are at the core Gramsci's analysis, can be transferred to international relations. In his prison writings, Gramsci reflected on the failure of the revolution, the defeat of the working-class and the rise of Fascism in Western Europe, leading up to World War II (Gramsci, 1971). He attributes these developments to what he calls "hegemony". Briefly, hegemony constitutes a new form of domination, which is sustained by a balanced combination between force and consensus. It is not only political, it is also civil: it not only relies on the expansion of the state, as the ideological and institutional apparatus that upholds this kind of social order; it also involves the extension of the state to the complex institutions and organisations that comprise the so-called civil society. However, Gramsci envisions an alternative moral and intellectual order, a so-called counter-hegemony, which will emanate from the unique experience of the working-class; the support of the organic intellectuals, who provide the intellectual basis of social values and struggles; and the collective efforts of the civil society to reorganise associations, trade unions, parties, schools, and the legal system, and thus gradually seize power and promote social change (that is, by partaking in what Gramsci calls a war of position) (Gramsci, 1971; Burawoy, 2003). In the past decades, Gramscian approaches have been applied to embrace not only the broader spectrum of social movements to protect human rights and the natural environment, alongside workers' rights, but also to explain relations of domination in the international arena, taking on the form of what could be considered as a "world hegemony" (McNally and Schwarzmantel, 2009).

Contemporary debates in this area of study explore whether a form of neoliberalism, where social relations are embedded in the market, has been imposed on all state and non-state actors in the world system by means of networks and institutions set up by international organisations (McNally and Schwarzmantel, 2009). In his discussion of the EU, Bieler (2005) traces the significant role of transnational forces of capital and labour within and outside Europe, alongside national capital and labour. Transnational capital and labour, which operate on a global scale, may support neoliberal restructuring at the national and supranational levels because they rely on open borders. National capital and labour may oppose neoliberalism and support state protectionism against international competition. Finally, European transnational capital and labour, that is, capital and labour which mainly operate across Member States within the EU and are largely influenced by national institutions and legislature, may promote a strong Internal Market combined with protection from non-member states. Therefore, Bieler argues, these interactions generated three models of capitalism, which combined to create a form of so-called "embedded neoliberalism" (van Apeldoorn, 2009): the Anglo-American neoliberal model of capitalism reflecting mainly the interests of transnational capital and labour; the neo-mercantilist project opting for protection from competition at EU borders and supported by transnational European firms; and the social democratic project offering the possibility of market regulation at a higher, European level by replicating national systems of social protection and cooperative economic governance. The difficulties of organising labour at the European and transnational levels together with the neoliberal underpinnings of globalisation gave some leverage to the first model, though it was modified to incorporate some social considerations addressed by the other two models.

Höpner and Schäfer (2010) use Polanyi's analysis to explain European integration as a process with opposing market-enforcing and market-shaping dimensions which dynamically determine the content and context of the EU economic and social model. First of all, the authors remind us that Polanyi's concepts of fictitious commodities, the double movement, and re-embeddedness stress: the separation of politics from the economy; the interplay of the international economic regime and domestic politics; and the tension between free markets and democracy. We recall that, according to Polanyi (1994), a market economy creates social and institutional forms which subordinate all elements of industry, including labour, land and money, to its principles of competition and capital accumulation. Labour and land consist of human beings, so to include them in market operations is to subordinate the substance of humankind and society to the laws of the market. Consequently, social values are downplayed, undermining the values of individual freedom which markets actually depend on. For Polanyi, these conditions will trigger a countermovement aimed at socially re-embedding markets and decommodifying fictitious commodities, like land and labour. However, we must keep in mind that a countermovement may not necessarily produce democratic solutions. Polanyi used the concepts of the double movement and re-embeddedness in order to understand why democracy collapsed during the 1920s and 1930s, giving rise to fascism and the World Wars. He concluded that this was a result of the utopian endeavour of economic liberalism in setting up a self-regulating market system.

In the EU context, Höpner and Schäfer (2010) observe forceful market-creating factors, not only generated by the European Competition Law, advocating market liberalisation and privatisation; they are also reinforced by the case laws of the European Court of Justice, which tends to over-interpret the "four freedoms". In the name of guaranteeing discrimination-free transnational access to Member States' markets, the "four freedoms" can now be used by the EU regulation bodies not only to eliminate disguised protectionism on the part of the Member States, but also to neutralise a wide variety of national political regulations, as well as the actions of non-state bodies such as firms or trade unions.[10] Furthermore, disputes are not being settled in the political arena by social movements, which are consistent with the history of social and labour struggles in Europe, but in courts, whose rulings would normally favour individual freedom, leaving limited room for collective discourse and political dissent. Of course, the authors observe a countermovement attempting to impose social regulation at the EU level by establishing supranational institutions such as the Open Method Coordination, the Lisbon Strategy, and dialogue with social partners. However, these mechanisms still remain in the area of soft coordination at the supranational level, that is, they rely on procedures and principles which are not binding for Member States. Thus, they are either used to supplement market operations within the Common Market, or they may even be reduced to the market logic itself.

[10] To illustrate, the Court has ruled that trade unions are obliged not to hinder or block transnational economic activity by collective action, such as strikes, unless the labour conflicts passed the requirements of the so-called "Gebhard formula". According to this formula, a restriction of market freedoms is acceptable only if: 1) it pursues a legitimate aim compatible with the Treaty; 2) it is justified by overriding reasons of public interest; 3) it is suitable for securing the attainment of the objective pursued; and 4) it does not go beyond what is necessary to obtain the legitimate aim (first introduced in ECJ C-55/94, Gebhard).

For example, the Lisbon Strategy stresses the employability and entrepreneurial mindsets of individuals, rather than social protection and decent work, despite the intense rhetoric on the expansion of Scandinavian-type flexicurity policies. It is assumed that once the inherent work skills and entrepreneurial instincts of the unemployed and poverty are liberated, all will be well, including problems of unemployment and poverty (Harvey, 2011). However, according to Lerche (2011), it is welfare state retrenchment coupled with labour market liberalisation that have increased flexibilisation and informalisation of labour, leading to wages below subsistent levels, insecure and uncertain work conditions, and disruption of social mobilisation and dialogue among workers and social partners for improving worker's living conditions and their position in production. Another example is the so-called European Semester, which was introduced after Höpner and Schäfer's publication. This supranational mechanism was set up to deal with Member States' macroeconomic imbalances and risks of spill-overs across countries. It involves the annual monitoring of Member States' economies and policies by EU institutions, which, in case of imbalances, make recommendations, practice supervision, or even impose penalty. Though these procedures require close coordination, social dialogue and solidarity at the supranational level, they simply rely on the evaluation of Member States' competitiveness and debt indicators, while indicators of social development, like unemployment and poverty, are considered auxiliary indicators. Social partners provide their opinion, but eventually they are invited to conform to the objectives consistent with Single Market principles (Christoforou, 2017).

These developments are consistent with the idea advanced by Lebaron and Phillips (2018), whereby the forms of "unfree" labour broadly defined are not solely perpetuated by firms and individuals operating in the private economy; they are facilitated by state power and policy, which shape the context within which contemporary "unfree" labour could flourish. They argue that this is true even in powerful and active states with high institutional capacity. Their US case study reveals how migration governance, labour market policies and corporate laws increased workers' vulnerability to exploitation by leading to precarious work conditions, including overtime, reduction in minimum wage, uncertainty in contracts, and the weakening of collective bargaining and social protection.

Notably, Höpner and Schäfer (2010) observe the asymmetry between market-enforcing and market-enhancing factors and speculate on the ways it may influence the economic and political situation in Europe. They argue that these developments have had a re-politicising effect on European integration, but they have not created a common political space or a shared identity of classes across Member States, which reflect a variety of capitalism. This is similar to Hooghe and Marks' (1997) argument above regarding the heterogeneity and diversity of the European polity. Jessop (2002) also argues that a multilateral process of the structural coupling of systems may generate an asymmetrical interdependence of institutional orders, where the capitalist economy develops a greater capacity to escape the constraints and controls of other systems. Höpner and Schäfer (2010) go as far as to characterise this as a process of negative politicisation. They call it negative because they examine the possibility that national public reaction to neoliberal policies may take the form of protectionism, nationalism, international conflicts and Euro-skepticism, which could undermine peace, development and welfare in Europe. We think they are less concerned with the

rolling back of the process of European integration and more with the spread of extremist and undemocratic practices reminiscent of the interwar period after the 1929 crisis, which ultimately led to conflict in Europe.

There are perhaps three lessons to be learnt from our analysis. Firstly, peace and freedom do not emerge automatically, as implied by scholars of the Enlightenment, because in a stratified society different groups attach different meanings and practices to these concepts, leading to the subordination and exploitation of certain groups, like workers. Secondly, the de-politicisation of social and international relations, which perceives free movement as a technical solution, free from ideological disputes, actually constitutes a highly politicised project, which exacerbates polarisation and conflict. Finally, besides the hegemonic project of neoliberalism and its staggering consequences to the very survival of humanity, alternative ideas and projects can emerge to re-shape markets along the lines of social values and institutions.

With regard to the final lesson, Bieler (2005) argues that neo-Gramscian approaches recognise the potential of agents to transform structures in order to pursue freedom and create new ethico-political forms, especially within the civil society, which includes trade unions and cooperatives. Yet he stresses that the neo-Gramscian perspectives of European integration have paid little attention to the potential of building resistance against the neoliberal project within the EU. Höpner and Schäfer (2010) employ Polanyi's analysis in order to investigate the ways in which social forces mobilise to re-embed the market and restore human value. They seem to detect what they call "market-shaping" forces within certain EU governance institutions and decision-making bodies, aimed at combatting the Single Market's neoliberal project. However, they observe that the active participation and representation of social and labour interests across Member States is limited. Generally, though the civil society is a core element of Gramsci's and Polanyi's work, there are few references to the specific ways it can organise and mobilise on a European and global scale to contain the sweeping effects of the neoliberal project. In the following section, we focus on these social formations and processes in order to examine their potential to promote social change by re-conceptualising work and production.

## 3. Commoning for freedom

### *3.1. Re-conceptualising work as a labour commons*

We endorse a notion of "commoning" as a countermovement to the neoliberal project by building collectives and communities, which promote alternative perceptions and practices of work and life on the basis of collective means and objectives, in order to restore substantive values of social and environmental protection and challenge market values and labour commodification.

Commons has traditionally been understood as a pool of natural resources that groups of people manage for individual and collective benefit (van Laerhoven and Ostrom, 2007; Akbulut, 2017; Basu et al., 2017). The use of "commons" for natural resources has its roots in European

intellectual history, where it referred to shared agricultural fields, grazing lands and forests, which were gradually enclosed and claimed as private property (Basu et al., 2017). However, prior to the publication of Hardin's article "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), titles containing the words "the commons", "common pool resources", or "common property" were very rare in the academic literature (van Laerhoven and Ostrom, 2007).

Hardin supported the impossibility of freedom in a commons, because it would lead to overexploitation and ruin, and therefore suggested centralisation or privatisation. However, Ostrom (1990) challenged the view that states and markets provide the sole solution to this tragedy, by introducing the possibility of community-based management. Since then, community and national governments, as well as international organisations, like the World Bank, have been stressing the need for community-based management of the commons to ensure efficient and sustainable use of natural resources. Yet, as Akbulut (2017) notes, these initiatives and policies seem to perceive commons as a means to promote market objectives of capital accumulation and competition. She promotes an alternative understanding of the commons as social spheres of life which mainly provide various degrees of protection against the market. Most importantly, this conceptualisation of the commons goes beyond an understanding of commons as existing, pre-defined entities and stresses the forms of relationships, networks, practices and struggles which produce and reproduce commons. By incorporating the social relations involved in building a commons, not only do we introduce commons in areas beyond natural resources, like knowledge; we view them as a process of social interaction and transformation. In this sense, commons emerge as spaces where production and reproduction take place under collective labour, equal access to resources and egalitarian forms of decision-making (Akbulut, 2017).

Similarly, for Fournier (2013), the commons is not simply a resource, but a social process of organisation and production. This process, referred to as "commoning", is about reversing the commodification of labour and reclaiming control over the means to produce *in* common, *for* the common and *of* the common. In this sense, it is not only a space for sharing resources; more importantly, it constitutes a scene for political struggle. In her study, she provides examples of social centres and communities where the co-creation of common goods relies on alternative work values, where members produce collectively for a common purpose and share the outcome of their production as well as the time spent on the various tasks needed to create and sustain common goods.[11] For Fournier, commoning goes beyond the distribution of rights to access commonly produced and preserved resources, and incorporates social duties and responsibilities for organising work in the provision of common goods. To determine the balance between rights and obligations she suggests what she calls the principle of "reciprocity in perpetuity", which addresses the question of how resources will be used and by whom. Generally, perpetuity makes the use of common goods

[11] In some cases, she observes, even the notion of "wage", as paid labour for performing a specified set of activities for a certain period of time, becomes absent, so participating in the production of a good is first and foremost understood as a responsibility to fulfil people's needs. We could take the argument further by saying that this kind of work also challenges current notions of unpaid or voluntary work, which is always defined in relation and in opposition to paid or waged labour, creating a wedge between the individual and the social. If waged labour is understood as an individual right to work bound by a (voluntarily accepted) private contract, then voluntary or unpaid work is seen as an individual right *not* to work for purposes of leisure and pleasure, which is not subject to binding rules and potential litigation.

conditional on their preservation and reproduction for all community members, while reciprocity makes it conditional on considerations of care and solidarity for all. This is consistent with Polanyi's analysis of the values of reciprocity, which usually identify with communities that operate outside the market and the state. For example, in a community garden, the commons may be open to those who preserve the natural environment and social networks in a way that they become accessible to others' needs for food, leisure, knowledge, and association. Notably, according to Fournier, what is potentially reproduced in perpetuity is not only the resource system but also the community, as patterns of social relations promoting alternative perceptions and practices of work and life.

Wainwright (2013) focuses precisely on the transition from labour as a commodity to labour as a commons. This transition, she contends, implies a paradigm shift from an economy in which our capacity to work is a private property, priced, bought and sold on the labour market, to one in which this human capacity is valued equally in all its forms, and is managed as the responsibility of society, for the benefit of society. She stresses that a core paradigm of labour as a commons would involve a double transformation. On the one hand, labour should cease to be a commodity by accepting that it is both personally exercised and crucially dependent on collaboration for its full realisation. This implies fundamentally different productive, evaluative and collective bargaining frameworks of reflection and decision based on participative democracy and social and environmental accounting, rather than individualised wage and income maximisation. On the other hand, labour should overcome gendered divisions and the subordination of women by restoring the importance of the reproduction of labour, especially in domestic care, and by considering it as an inherent part of the capacity to work. This means that broader social issues related to economic security, social divisions and patriarchal cultures may need to be addressed beyond processes of commoning.

For Wainwright (2013) this change between life and labour constitutes a key component in a commons economy, enabling us to overcome the separation of production from reproduction and thus production from consumption. In fact, a labour commons is a necessary condition of the life of many other commons; at the same time, it virtually depends on various other commons, like family, education and culture, or even cooperative and women's movements. At this historical moment, it may be difficult to concretise the specific values and institutions comprising a labour commons. Wainwright tries to offer practical solutions for realising this transition to a labour commons. She refers to Ostrom's principles for building a commons, which basically stress the need for developing an incentive-based mechanism as a system of rules and norms to govern members' behaviour, determine shared objectives and allocate responsibilities. However, as Wainwright argues, it is important to shift from an instrumental logic to a prefigurative one, that is, to act in the present according to the social values we are trying to create. Our capacity to labour or to create is not only *for the good life*, but is itself *part of the good of life*. This is consistent with Fournier's (2013) conceptualisation of commoning as organising *in* common, *for* the common and *of* the common.

It may indeed be difficult to understand and implement the values and practices enabling us to move beyond conventional market values and institutions that organise labour. This may even be true for traditional labour movements and trade unionists, whose activities and objectives typically centre on negotiations regarding wages and redistribution through the labour market. In response to these reservations, we follow Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2009) by endorsing the idea that formal

market transactions, wage labour and capitalist enterprise constitute but the tip of an iceberg, beneath which exists a myriad of submerged but sustaining alternative and non-market transactions, alternatively paid and unpaid labour, alternative capitalist and non-capitalist enterprises, which interact with one another and form a diverse economy of multiplicity, interdependence and potentiality. Conceptions of the varieties of capitalism in Europe discussed in the previous section may be underestimating these forms of cooperative production and community economy, by discarding the wide range of non-capitalist economies, or community economies, as Gibson-Graham and Roelvink call them, which co-construct capitalist institutional variations. We argue that within this diverse economy we can discover the alternative labour forms that already exist in order to envision a labour commons and realise a kind of labour that is truly "free", free to pursue substantive human values, individually and collectively, for social and environmental protection. We focus on cooperatives as existing forms of alternative labour in order to explore their potential to build a labour commons.

### *3.2. Cooperatives as labour commons*

According to Vieta (2014), since the 19th century workers' associations such as cooperatives, comprising locally-rooted, broadly-federated and collectively-owned productive entities, have been vital in overcoming conditions of labour exploitation, especially within capitalist modes of production. Notably, the author identifies these initiatives with the concept of "autogestión", an ethico-political process of workers' struggles to achieve self-management by promoting streams of self-determination; by developing a vision for a free society; and by using their faith in human beings' capacity for cooperation. In his historical analysis of autogestión, he describes how workers' struggles for self-determination and self-management have been shaped by their confrontations against capitalist structures and values of competition and capital accumulation in "free" markets. Furthermore, he notes that these struggles have been inspired by real historical moments of labouring people's resistance, which trace back to pre-capitalist and non-capitalist societies, and demonstrate commonly-owned and cooperatively-based economic models for combatting ideologies and practices of hierarchical control and coercion. According to the author, a common theme across these historical moments is the possibility of the full development and realisation of the person, emanating from within, in collaboration with others and with respect to personal freedom and dignity.

In recent times, in the 21st century, Vieta (2014) argues that autogestión is positioned on two planes: practices of cooperative production at the level of the enterprise, on the one hand, and social and participative democracy at the territorial level, on the other. At the micro-level this process manifests as bottom-up initiatives and people-centred solidarity, which are rooted in economic justice and participative democracy. These initiatives often take the form of workers' cooperatives and collectives, worker-recuperated enterprises, rural producer collectives, family-based microenterprises, and neighbourhood collectives. They exert pressure on local, regional, national and supranational administrative bodies in order to respond to the needs of worker-led firms and local

community development.[12] More importantly, these collectives appear as prefigurative experiments of another paradigm where the pursuit of profit and self-interest give way to democratic control of the labour process; surplus-sharing; inter-cooperative networks of solidarity; and social responsibility for other people's needs in the community. They resonate with contemporary notions of commons, particularly of labour commons, because they develop as the democratised organisation of productive and reproductive work, which transforms labour into a commoning practice. Azzellini (2018) argues that worker-recuperated companies offer a new perspective on labour as a commons, where labour is not treated as an individual commodity, but as a human ability, which is the outcome of an intrinsically social, cooperative activity, within and outside the workplace.

For Gibson-Graham (2006), cooperative production and community economies are to be seen as a generative commons, that is, as an open-ended generative vision of an alternative economic possibility for reclaiming our freedom to control our productive capacities and economic imaginaries. This is similar to an open-ended, under-determined process of "becoming" in Vieta's (2014) conception of autogestión. However, it is worth noting that for Gibson-Graham (2003) an invigorated economic politics may require a shift from "capitalocentric" discourses, which evaluate alternative cooperative business and work practices with respect to capitalism (either as different from, the same as, beholden to, or dominated by its forces and relations), toward the study of non-capitalist practices and economies.

There are concerns about whether cooperatives have the capacities to escape the hegemony of the commodity form (Gibson-Graham, 2003; de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Ranis, 2016). The so-called "degeneration thesis" portrays the limitations that cooperatives face in becoming driving forces of social change. As Gibson-Graham (2003) describes, the thesis claims that the cooperative and democratic character of cooperatives may be threatened by inherent tensions between efficiency and welfare objectives, mostly due to the pressures of a global environment where the pursuit of economic profit and cost-competitiveness prevail. In the following, we examine how market-deepening and market-regulating forces generated by EU institutions and policies may impact cooperativist values and institutions across Europe and affect their potential to create labour commons and alternative conceptions and practices of work.

### *3.3. Cooperativist values and institutions in the EU*

To assess cooperativist values and institutions in the EU, we appeal to the so-called social economy (SE). This term is used by the EU to identify a broad set of cooperativist practices in order to cover the variety of institutional, legal, political and historical formations and contexts, which characterise different European economies. According to the *Social Business Initiative* (European Commission, 2011), which is considered as the SE blueprint for the EU, it includes: cooperatives,

[12] To illustrate, Vieta (2016) documents certain innovative initiatives introduced by Argentinian worker-recuperated enterprises (ERTs), including, among others, practices of recycling leftover materials from production processes for economic and ecological purposes; accessing government funding sources and business development programmes in partnership with university research teams, foreign NGOs, or other research initiatives working in conjunction with ERTs; and the emergence of "economies of solidarity" among ERTs.

associations, foundations, and social enterprises. SE organisations date back to the Industrial Revolution and provide goods and services by combining economic and social goals in order to counter the inefficiencies and injustices of the market and to promote cooperation, equality and development. Despite the differences across countries and regions, a conceptual definition of the European SE is found in the *Charter of Principles of the Social Economy*, which was adopted in 2002 by the European Standing Conference on Cooperatives, Mutual Societies, Associations and Foundations (CEP-CMAF), the EU-level representative organisation for the SE, now called Social Economy Europe.[13] According to this definition, SE organisations in Europe share a set of common, cooperativist principles, including: the primacy of the individual and the social objective over capital; voluntary and open membership; democratic control by the membership; combination of the interests of members, users and general interest (society); defence and application of the principle of solidarity and responsibility; and autonomous management and independence from public authorities (CIRIEC, 2012: 19).[14]

According to CIRIEC (2012), the SE currently provides paid employment to over 14.5 million Europeans, which is equivalent to approximately 6.5% of the working population of the EE-27 and 7.4% of the working population of the EU-15 Member States. In fact, in Sweden, Belgium, Italy, France and the Netherlands, the SE accounts for 9% to 11.5% of the working population. Among the EU-15, it is the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland and Denmark) that have a relatively high average at 8.7%, whereas those of the Mediterranean have a rather low average at 6%. The relatively low average in Member States outside the traditional EU-15 is mostly influenced by the low average of Eastern European countries (Estonia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania and Latvia). Some studies argue that Member States of Northern and Continental Europe have had a more developed institutional and legal framework for SE organisations (Evers and Laville, 2004; Osborne, 2008; see also CIRIEC, 2012, 2017). This is in contrast with the contemporary experience of some Southern and Eastern European countries that have only recently passed legislation for the SE. In these countries, people's efforts to collectively mobilise and organise against exploitation, inequality and poverty have often been undermined by authoritarian regimes, national conflicts, and foreign intervention.

However, we must be cautious in using such data to conduct cross-country comparisons. For example, the data used above excludes informal groupings that provide training and services to vulnerable groups and produce higher participation in the SE. At the same time, it includes organisations that may have obtained a legal form, but do not have a considerable impact in the social provision of goods and services and the dissemination of cooperativist values and institutions. More importantly, different conceptions and practices of the SE exist among EU Member States, as well as among EU institutions and policies. These reflect the differential influence not only of the varieties of capitalism, but also of non-capitalist economies across countries and regions. In the following, we focus on the discrepancies among EU institutions and policies and the unfavourable

[13] The European Standing Conference on Cooperatives, Mutual Societies, Associations and Foundations (CEP-CMAF) was set up in November 2000, and in 2008 changed its name to Social Economy Europe (http://www.socialeconomy.eu.org).
[14] See also: http://www.socialeconomy.eu.org/who-see.

impact they may have on the prefigurative and transformational dynamics of cooperative business and work practices in Europe.

According to the European Commission DG on the Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SME's, "social economy enterprises contribute to the EU's employment, social cohesion, regional and rural development, environmental protection, consumer protection, agricultural, third countries development, and social security policies".[15] Moreover, according to the Council of the European Union (2015: 2), "[the social economy] plays an important role in the transformation and evolution of contemporary societies, welfare systems and economies thus substantially contributing to economic, social and human development across and beyond Europe and are supplementary to existing welfare regimes in many Member States. (…) [T]he social economy is a sector which has weathered the economic crisis much better than others and is gaining increasing recognition at European level." Indeed, the EU supports the social economy and social entrepreneurship in its Labour Market Policies, as well as in its Cohesion Policy and Operational Programmes of the current programming period (2014-2020), in order to combat youth unemployment and poverty after the crisis.

Despite these SE-enhancing forces, the EU seems to demonstrate a rather weak commitment to social transformation and development via the SE. Indicatively, only scant, if any, reference is made to the SE and social entrepreneurship in the Council's 2013 recommendation on establishing the Youth Guarantee (an EU fund instituted during the 2014-2020 programming period to combat youth unemployment and poverty), in the Commission's 2016 Communication on the progress of the Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment, and in the National Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans. Therefore, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs of the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2015) was compelled to call on the Commission and the Member States to coordinate measures for social entrepreneurship with their national plans for the implementation of the EU funds, especially those aimed at increasing youth employment and social cohesion. In its report, the Committee explicitly regrets the low level of recognition granted to the social and solidarity-based economy and its potential to contribute to the Union's goals for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

However, we argue that these objectives would be difficult to achieve, because, as discussed in the previous section, the EU labour market policies, as well as policies for the promotion of the SE, generally rely on the individualisation and marketisation of the means and ends of human action. These values and practices are inconsistent with an SE founded on principles of cooperative production and participatory democracy. In particular, the Commission's *Social Business Initiative* considers the social and solidarity economy as a means for the promotion of a "highly competitive social market economy" (European Commission, 2011: 2). However, the *Social Europe Guide on the Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship*, published by the European Commission, stresses the discrepancies between the "social economy" and the "social market economy" (European Commission, 2013). On the one hand, "social economy" relates to a specific part of the economy, namely the set of organisations characterised primarily by social aims and a participative governance system, producing goods and services alongside the market and the state. On the other hand, the

[15] See http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/social-economy_en.

"social market economy" refers to a political-economic model created in the post-war period to combine the principle of market freedom with the principle of social security by giving the state an active role in balancing market competition and social development. The idea was to avoid the malaise of the two extremes, on the one hand, a *laissez faire* capitalism (where the state has minimal intervention) and, on the other, centrally-planned, hierarchical economies (where the state has complete control).[16] In this setting, atomised self-seeking individual action remains the dominant motivation and the prime principle of human action in the economy and society, so non-market institutions, like the state and the SE, are instrumentally employed to preserve market mechanisms and objectives. These objectives are evident in the 2011 Action Plan for Supporting Social Entrepreneurship in Europe, which forms the framework for Member-States' national action plans for the SE. At the same time, representatives of the SE take part only in forms of soft coordination and social dialogue with little impact on changing EU policies.

Therefore, there is risk of degeneration of cooperative values and practices as a result of EU interventions. A European SE framed on the values and practices of a labour commons would clearly require a revision of the EU's economic and social model based on the re-embeddedness of the economy and the combination of forms of social integration and values of exchange, redistribution, and reciprocity. Diverse, collective efforts at the national and supranational levels will be needed to resist the neoliberal project and revise concepts and practices of SE and work in Europe. These ideas are consistent with the transformational dynamics of an active, civil society that appear in the work of Gramsci and Polanyi, which were discussed in the previous section. An active, civil society based on cooperative values and commoning practices will enable the social re-embeddedness of the economy and the re-conceptualisation of work to reflect human needs and substantive values rather than personal profit and capital accumulation.

It may be difficult to envision a new economic and social model for Europe; yet it is imperative in view of the socio-economic deterioration and the political polarisation created by the current crises. First of all, a new understanding of cooperatives and the SE in general is required. Rather than becoming a means to correct various market imperfections, cooperatives and the SE can explore their potential to create prefigurative and transformational relations toward a solidaristic, self-governing economy and society (e.g. de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Ranis, 2016; Christoforou and Adaman, 2018). Furthermore, workers' associations and cooperatives can become important sites for learning how to self-organise and create collective modes of production and community economies on the basis of cooperative and solidaristic values and practices (Gibson-Graham, 2003, 2006; Vail, 2010; Vieta, 2014; Azzellini, 2018). We could add that social learning is an essential element of commoning processes: it raises our awareness of the social conditions and dynamics that create injustice; it enables us to interact with one another in order to resist and change our situation; it opens our eyes to other people's needs and the possibility of a better life; and it helps us determine how to work together and what values and practices are worth pursuing for individual and social progress.

[16] In fact, the principles of the "social market economy", conjoining competition, growth and innovation with social policy, justice and welfare, appear in the EU Treaties to which all Member States are bound.

## 4. Conclusions

Our analysis challenges the idea that in contemporary societies workers have ownership over their labour power, which they can offer to any employer they choose in exchange for a wage determined by the workers and employers who (freely and voluntarily) participate in the labour market. We offered evidence that labour may not really be so "free". Millions of workers around the globe face forms of non-economic exploitation and are trapped in forced labour in both the developed and developing world. More importantly, the decline in the quality of employment and living conditions of workers, characterised by below subsistent-level wages, appalling working conditions, and the weakening of collective bargaining and social security, all demonstrate forms of economic exploitation and sources of "un-freedom", which are also present in developed capitalist countries.

We focused on the case of the EU, where the Single Market principles of competition, capital accumulation and free movement are used to promote peace, productivity and better living standards across Member States. However, we found evidence that unemployment and poverty have increased, while the quality of employment (including the level of wages, collective representation and social dialogue) is deteriorating. We speculated that the neoliberal project promoted by the Single Market favoured individualisation and marketisation of work and human action, leading to further deterioration of people's working and living conditions. We argued for the need to counter these debilitating effects of market-deepening forces by restoring substantive human values of social and environmental protection. We suggested that active, civil society organisations, such as cooperatives, can promote collective values and institutions of redistribution and reciprocity on the basis of participatory democracy in order to create labour commons and alternative conceptions of work. Labour commons constitute a space where labour is not a commodity; it is an expression of human creativity, social activity, and a source of social production and reproduction, on the basis of alternative perceptions of work and life which challenge market values and labour commodification. They should be perceived as a social process of "becoming", or one of "learning" to become, in order to act collectively and reclaim control over our own work and life. We stressed that it was important to envision a new European economic and social model which is founded on collective values and practices of social and environmental protection and thus provides fertile ground for re-conceptualising work and enhancing cooperatives' prefigurative and transformational potential to build labour commons.

As we have mentioned, these alternative collectives and economic imaginaries exist and constitute non-capitalist communities which try to combat the inefficiencies and injustices of market hegemony. However, more research is needed to determine the ways of furthering the social objectives and visions of these communities. Of a number of issues to consider, we focused our attention to certain factors that we think are critical at the current historical junction. An important issue is the problem of scale. Harvey (2011) points out that lessons gained from the collective organisation of small-scale solidarity economies (e.g., the collective management and preservation of common natural resources) may not automatically translate into global solutions (e.g., global

warming) without resorting to nested hierarchical forms of decision-making in place of direct negotiations among community members. The question is how inter-regional and transnational movements and multi-level governance structures can come about on the basis of participatory democracy and negotiated coordination (see, for instance, Ostrom, 1990; Adaman and Devine, 2002).

Another issue worth investigating refers to the changes that need to be made in the ways we perceive our work, life and humanity. For example, the purpose of education would need to be re-defined so it is not seen as the production of students for wage labour, but as the production of knowledge for articulating and pursuing, individually and collectively, human needs and social values. Weber (2015) states that we suffer not only because of the commodification of the natural and social world, but also because of the way we perceive the world itself, which makes commodification the sole way we relate to it. Thus, we should open our minds to alternative rationalities and subjectivities. These alternatives may yet to take form through discursive processes of reflection and social learning. However, we often forget that they may already exist in different forms in the history of humankind.

This brings us to the final issue which we believe deserves further research and relates to the study of the history of labour and commons. Fournier (2013) stresses that when community members protest against the private dispossession and appropriation of shared resources in their area they are reclaiming their right to the community, particularly to the history they have created in that community. We argue that history is important because it can help determine our actuality and potentiality and inform our vision for a better life and better society. We make the qualification that our record of past successes and failures should not only focus on the trends of capital accumulation; it should give proper merit to workers' active, collective efforts to reclaim their labour and lives, restore substantive human values, and promote social change.

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